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The White House From the Inside

By Danny McCue

Tom Hanks, looking markedly more comfortable in the surroundings than he did in *Forrest Gump*, stood with his son next to the familiar desk, and joked with a clutch of photographers.

"Did you hear about the president's new dress code for the White House press corps?" he asked. "You have to wear your underwear on the outside of your pants."

The occasion was the Oval Office presentation of the Congressional Space Medal of Honor to James Arthur Lovell Jr., the real-life commander of Apollo 13, and the person Mr. Hanks plays in the summer blockbuster movie.

Life As A Fly On The Wall In The Center Of The Known Universe

Suddenly, White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta entered the room, and right behind him came President Bill Clinton and Mr. and Mrs. Lovell.

Without missing so much as a beat, the president acknowledged the U.S. Senators — including John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth — administration advisors, and former Space Medal of Honor winner Pete Conrad, who crowded one side of the room.

"And, of course, we're delighted to have Tom Hanks and his son Colin here," the president said before beginning his formal remarks. "They're not only here because of *Apollo 13*, but, so that when they make a sequel to *Forrest Gump*, he won't have to have a computer-generated president."

It was Nassau County Democratic Party Chairman Stephen J. Sabbeth who made more or less stumbling upon the presidential news conference possible.

A few weeks earlier, Mr. Sabbeth had invited his local committee heads to accompany him to Washington for a meeting with the party's national leadership. (See sidebar, page 28.)

"What I'm trying to do is both reward these leaders for the hard work they've done in the past, and to give them a sense of what all their work goes for," Mr. Sabbeth said shortly after the group — with two reporters in tow — arrived in the heart of the capital.

The focus of that top-level meeting, which was held in the Executive Office Building across the street from the White House, and to which the press was cordially not invited, was the groundwork that must be laid in anticipation of President Clinton's re-election campaign.

Rather than simply ask the reporters to cool their heels until the session concluded, political strategist Bill Green and his contacts in the executive mansion, made separate arrangements for them.

***THE WESTBURY TIMES'* editor, Danny McCue, with the "first lady" of White House correspondents and UPI White House Bureau Chief, Helen Thomas, in Washington last week.**

"Come with me," said Eric Eve, a special assistant to the Deputy White House Chief of Staff. "We've gotten you clearance to hang out with the White House Press Corps."

Of all the improbable places a local newspaper editor might find himself, being in the environs of the President of the United States is probably the headiest.

Hello Mr. Vice President...

Wolf Blitzer, who became a household name covering the Persian Gulf War for CNN, was moving quickly toward his camera crew on the White House lawn as Mr. Eve escorted a reporter down the bluff that leads to the press room at 1600 Penn-

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New Cassel's Littlest Crimefighter

Kid's Smarts Lead To Busts/Threats

By Danny McCue

It looked just like a siege last Tuesday in front of the New Cassel apartment house the Sorto family calls home.

But then, what would one expect when a five-year-old-turned-crime-fighter turns instant media celebrity.

Four days earlier, after Nassau police had completed a routine drug bust, arresting Rozanni Colleso, of New Cassel, for selling marijuana, young Arnold Sorto happened by and subsequently led Nassau police to an alley-way stash of substance near his family's Roman Street home.

Though the police had found some bags of the drug on Mr. Colleso's person, Sorto's tip netted them an additional 67 bags that would have sold for about $5 a piece.

About two hours after the bust, police

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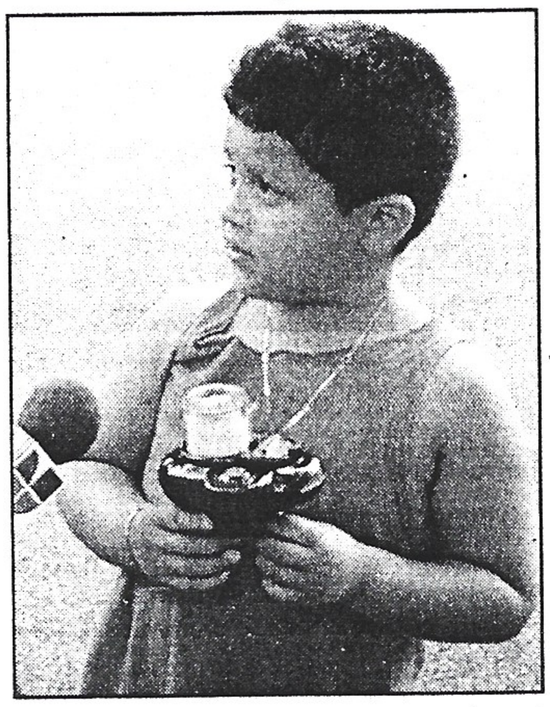

ARNOLD SORTO enduring just a few of the several interviews he was asked to give last Tuesday. Photo by Danny McCue

Bronx Man Killed In Paraglider Crash

By Danny McCue

A 30-year-old Bronx man has died as the result of injuries he sustained in a flying accident that occurred Saturday afternoon in Old Westbury.

According to Nassau police detectives, Joel Reynoso, of Clay Avenue in the Bronx, was operating a paraglider — a parachute type glider propelled by a 22 Hp engine — approximately 70 feet in the air over the Polo Estates off Whitney Road in Old Westbury, when he apparently lost control of the craft and crashed.

A paraglider is equipped with a seat for the operator who launches it by running. A private instructor was on the ground at the time of the accident, and was communicating with Mr. Reynoso via a one-way radio.

Mr. Reynoso was airlifted by police helicopter to the Nassau County Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead on Saturday night.

The paraglider was safeguarded at the scene by the Third Squad.

The Federal Aviation Administration has been notified of the accident and an investigation is ongoing as to the cause.

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The White House From the Inside

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sylvania Avenue.

The west wing of the White House, where the press room is located, is the hub of national affairs in this country — a point vividly driven home when the reporter crossed paths with a very tanned and very affable Vice President Albert Gore. Not too much further inside, the president was chatting with astronauts.

Within minutes, standing before a select portion of the White House Press Corps, President Clinton would be expounding upon the wider significance of the space program's accomplishments.

"By replacing warheads with space capsules atop the Saturn V rocket, we launched more than a space program," he said, still photographers clicking away. "We launched the beginning of the end of the cold war... "

"It's organized chaos and the best beat in the world," said Helen Thomas shortly after the press conference broke up.

Thomas, who has covered The White House for UPI since the Kennedy administration and has served as the wire service's bureau chief there since 1974, said inquisitiveness is the key to covering the president.

"As a [White House] reporter, some doors are closed to you, doors you'd like to get open, and you always have to be two steps ahead of the press officer," she explained. "My advice to anyone coming in here would be, 'Don't be afraid to ask questions at any time.' You have to get them when you can."

ABC's Sam Donaldson, who covered the Reagan White House for eight years and was taking a break from his *Primetime Live* duties to pay a now rare visit to the press room, agreed.

"Our job is to hit them with a question and see them respond — and to let the public see them respond," he said. "The really good ones ask questions that would never have been posed if they hadn't asked them.

"In the final analysis, there are no bad questions, just bad answers that get people into uncomfortable situations," he added.

Pull Up A Seat and Sit A Spell

The White House press room is about 45 feet long and 25 feet wide, with most of the space being taken up by theater-type seats, broadcast equipment, and sundry cameras of every description.

At one end of the room is the podium from which Press Secretary Mike McCurry makes his daily briefing to the media, and from which the president and others in the administration make pronouncements.

Among the most bizarrely memorable of the latter occurred 14 years ago, when then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig, apparently forgetting the constitutionally-mandated line of succession, declared himself in charge after President Ronald Reagan was shot by David Hinckley.

Through a doorway next to the podium and down an abbreviated corridor, are the offices of George Stephanopoulos and other presidential advisors. Directly upstairs is the Oval Office.

At the other end of the press room, another short corridor leads to the reporters' cubicles, unglamorously small affairs with just enough room for a small desk, a chair, a computer, and a few modest reference books.

A point of trivia: the press room actually sits atop the White House pool built for Franklin Roosevelt and last used by John F. Kennedy. During the Nixon years the pool was boarded over and the press installed in its place. Several members of the press corps attest that the pool is still intact in all its tiled splendor just beneath their feet.

Though Thomas is far from jaded after 30 years on the beat, she and others in the White House Press Corps admit that there's a lot of "hurry up and wait."

"We jump when they tell us to jump," Helen Thomas said.

The timing of the President's need to summon the press is always open to question.

"Eight hours of extended boredom punctuated by 30 second bursts of absolute panic," is how Bruce K. Young, who photographs the president for the Reuters News Service, described the day-to-day of the press room.

"Every journalist goes into it with a vision of the big story, big news, the big event — and it sort of is the pinnacle — but after awhile, you begin to take a different point of view," Mr. Young said. "You think of all the possibilities of what 'The Big One' might entail at The White House, and then the boredom becomes strangely reassuring."

Young Photographers In Love

Interestingly enough, Mr. Young wasn't working The White House last Wednesday afternoon, but instead had come to retrieve the family car keys from his wife Jennifer, a White House photographer for the competing AFP news service.

"We met on a stakeout," he said. "President Bush's nominee for Secretary of Defense had been rejected, and we were both sent out to get a picture of him... "

PHOTOGRAPHERS Bruce and Jennifer Young, who cover The White House for competing news services. Photo by Danny McCue

"And it was nighttime, and it was snowing," Jennifer Young added as she prepared to send her Lovell-Clinton-Hanks film out to be developed.

There followed what Jennifer Young jokingly described as "a whole series of horrible accidents" that led to their working the same beat for competitive organizations.

He arrived at The White House four years ago; she was assigned here a little later. Before coming to the press room, Mr. Young was assigned to Andrews Air Force Base, the point of arrival and departure for the president and other dignitaries.

"That was right at the end of the Bush administration," he said. "My job was to take a lot of pictures of people getting in and out of airplanes."

He, it turned out, was in a far safer place than his wife, who recalled the time she was struck by a large piece of cinderblock during a protest of a Ku Klux Klan march through Washington.

"I was photographing it coming down," she sheepishly admitted with a laugh. "The next thing I knew it had hit me in the head."

Today, they said, they live a life of disjointed schedules and friendly competition. "We are competing, in a sense, but we never take that home," Mrs. Young said. "One thing we do to handle it is save and frame newspapers that have our photos on their front pages. We don't hang them up, however, until we have an equal number."

"Fortunately, there's very little that happens at The White House that's a big surprise, so we don't often get into situations where we are trying to scoop each other," Mr. Young said.

"The shooting outside CIA headquarters a few years ago was probably one of the biggest surprises we had, but in that case, his pager went off at precisely the same time that my bureau called," Mrs. Young said.

"But what about that night with Quayle?" Mr. Young began.

"Yeah, there was that night the phone rang and I was told, 'You have to get to The White House right away for the inauguration of Dan Quayle,"' Mrs. Young said.

"It was the night President Bush threw up on the Japanese Prime Minister," Mr. Young said. "Of course we utilized the first tool of political news gathering, stumbling into the living room and turning on CNN."

"Needless to say, I was wide awake instantly," Mrs. Young said.

Fours Guys And A Podium

If there's one consistent complaint voiced by the photographers who cover The White House, it's that their work is artistically stifling.

"I like to think that we're hired because of what we *can* do, photographically and journalistically, rather than for what we actually do," said Leighton D.

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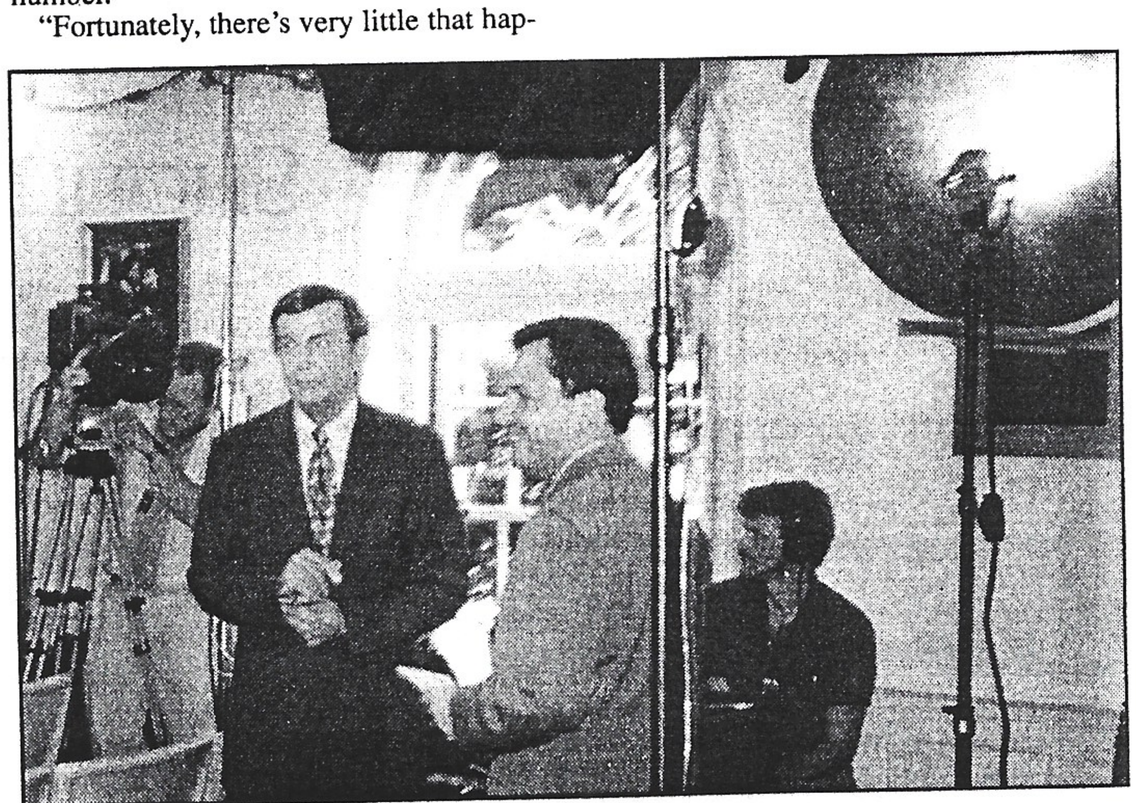
TOM HANKS MEETS the Nassau Democratic delegation outside the blue room in The White House. Photo by Danny McCue



ABC'S SAM DONALDSON makes a rare visit to his old stomping grounds, the White House press room. Photo by Danny McCue

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Mark, a UPI photographer who has covered The White House off and on since the Reagan years, but says he feels more at home in the war zones of the Middle East and Africa.

"Covering The White House, you stand behind the velvet rope and take pictures that someone else has staged for you," he said. "In war you experience and try to capture the gamut of human emotions."

The Young's seconded Mr. Mark's point.

"A lot of times, when you get down to it, our subjects are just a bunch of white guys in suits. It comes down to being a technical challenge, but there's not much you can do with four men and a podium," Mr. Young said.

"I often think about a point made by a Times photographer a while back," Mrs. Young remembered. "he said, 'If you're photographing the people at the podium, then you've missed the picture. The story — the shot — actually occurred somewhere else."'

Everybody Into The Pool

Because the press follows his every public move, coverage of events both inside and outside The White House is divided into pools of reporters and camera people. Who gets to go where is determined by pool coordinators or producers. Vija Udenans works with the television crews.

"As pool producer, I negotiate with The White House to get TV cameras from ABC, CBS, NBC, and/or CNN in where there might otherwise only be still photographers.

"I'm the conduit," she continued. "I let the networks know what pictures will be available, organize the coverage. The pool rotates every day."

Print reporters are under similar restraints. When the president left The White House Wednesday morning, George Condon of the Copley News Service followed the motorcade in a press car. When he returned, he provided the following three paragraph description for his colleagues.

"Both motorcades were relatively uneventful, with surprised and waving tourists doing their touristy things — except for one man who apparently thought he was Jack McDowell saluting Yankees fans in New York rather than greeting the motorcade of the President.

"As the motorcade sped past him, this somewhat disheveled man stood in the middle of Independence Avenue by the Smithsonian, stoically holding one finger aloft as if to say, 'We're number one,' or some variation of that message.

"Other than that, zilch for color."

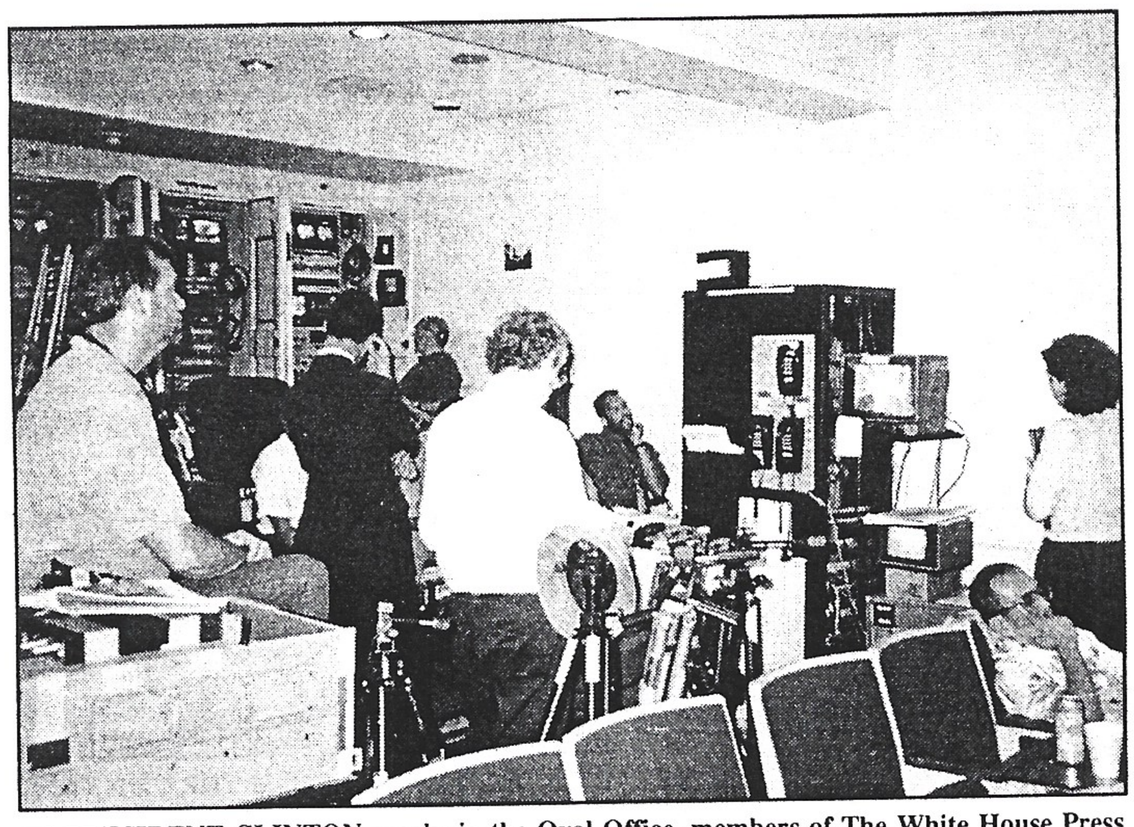
In the language of the press corps, Mr. Clinton and his predecessors are known as POTUS, as in President-Of-The-United-States. Another important word in the pool reporter lexicon is "Lid," as in, the lid is on.

"That's when they promise us that there will be no more news for the day, so we can go home," Mr. Young said adding that The White House is very good at keeping their word. Sometimes, however, the outside world hasn't been hipped to the agreement.

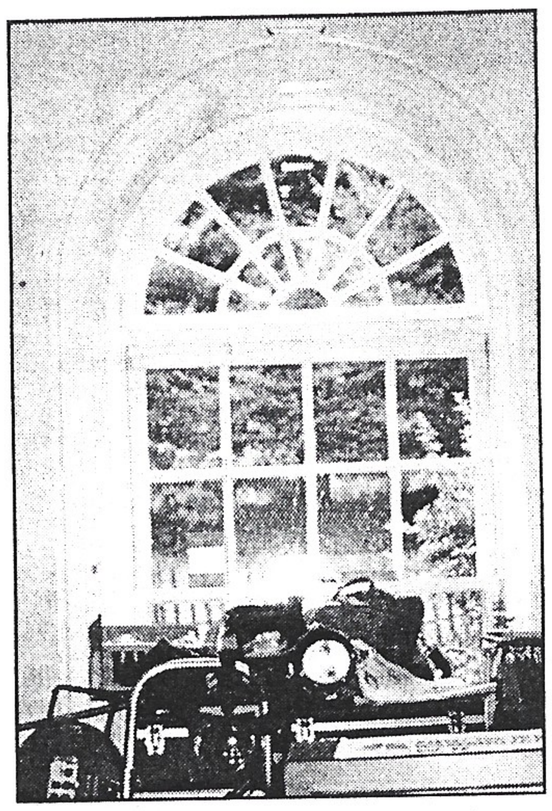
"Probably the most bizarre thing that's happened since Clinton has been here is when that sniper took some shots at the house from outside the gate," Mr. Young said.

"Though we're below the bluff, the falling trajectory of the bullet sent it right through that window (he pointed to one of five ornate windows that line one side of the room), splattering a CNN crew with glass.

"Since it was a weekend and the lid was on, the members of that crew were the only people in the room, and I have to give them a lot of credit, they got out of here and across the lawn and got footage of the guy being dragged off. With the security that's around The White House, that was a feat unto itself."



AS PRESIDENT CLINTON speaks in the Oval Office, members of The White House Press Corps not in the "pool" watch it on video monitors. Photo by Danny McCue



THE WINDOW THROUGH which a sniper's bullet passed. Photo by Danny McCue

Shortly before the start of the Persian Gulf War, Mrs. Young was in the press room with a few others, when the two lights above the press room door went on, indicating that the Lid was on.

"A short time later, President Bush happened by," she recalled. "'What are you guys doing here?' he said. I said, 'Well, we thought you might bomb someone.'

"He said, 'It's not going to happen tonight. Get a life.' I always say that was the night I was told to get a life by the president of the United States."

Presidents They Have Known

"The problem with a lot of this stuff is every time [the President] leaves this area, there are about a dozen people who follow along," said Mr. Young. "You can imagine what havoc that causes when he visits a private home. There have been times when we've literally stumbled, en masse, into what would ordinarily be an intimate restaurant — much to the displeasure of the owner."

As one could well imagine, the nuts and bolts of covering the President of the United States changes with each administration.

"Reagan was much different from Clinton or even Bush," said Leighton Mark. "Mr. Reagan was a lot more scheduled, and that made for a lot more relaxed atmosphere than exists now.

"If we were told that he was going to be on a certain mark, in a certain spot, at 8:30 a.m., he would be right there, at 8:30 a.m. sharp. He just had a different kind of lifestyle from the people who followed him, and as a result, we could set aside time to set up our equipment; we knew and could adapt to the schedule. We didn't have to hit the ground running."

"President Carter has easily been the most standoff-ish president since I've been here," said ABC television cameraman Hank Brown. "Some administrations since have been more laid back in regard to the press, but this one is not. I think this administration affords the least access to the President since the Carter years.

"Compared to Reagan, Bush was more of a working president, where every hour was dedicated to some kind of event. [As a member of the press], you spent more time actually working, but you were enjoying it.

"And Clinton, he's a working, working president. I think every minute is accounted for, and that means he'll do things like, fly directly to Budapest, Hungry, spend four hours, and fly right back to Washington. Those movements are very challenging to cover."

As difficult as abrupt trips around the world might be on the press corps, they reserve most of their Clinton-related barps for what literally amounts to a jaunt around the block

"The jog is a nuisance," Jennifer Young said without hesitation. "He jogs and we follow him in a blue van."

Such is the displeasure that the press corps feels for these early morning forays that the pool reports of them verge on the nasty.

"The AP and Washington Post Style section ballyhoo the demise of the Presidential Jog, and presto, the First Contrarian takes to the streets for an official jog," began Wednesday's dispatch on Mr. Clinton's morning run.

"The biggest surprise around here is when President Clinton decides either to jog or play golf, because both of these are things he apparently decides to do on the spur of the moment," Mr. Young explained.

"It's exercise for him, and that's all well and good, but there's no communication about whether he's running of not, and so everyday we gather at 6:45 a.m. and look, and guess, and watch to see if the secret service has jogging shorts on.

"The trouble is, sometimes they don't even know, half the secret service detail reports to work in jogging shorts, and half not. A lot of energy is expended trying to figure out what's going on."

A Matter of Style

When it comes to discussing the differences between Presidents Clinton and Bush with the press corps, the biggest change in their lives is really one of style. "The people who work in the Clinton press office are at least 10 years younger than the Bush people, and as a result you just relate to the office differently." Mrs. Young said.

"For instance," she continued, referring to her clothes. "I would never have dressed casually covering Bush, but I feel comfortable wearing jeans and tennis shoes around Clinton."

The thing about President Bush, Mrs. Young said, was that despite the aura of formality, the president himself felt very at ease with members of the press.

"The Bush's dogs were always hanging out with us," Mrs. Young said.

"His dog Ranger was my bud," agreed Wilfred Lee, of the Associated Press.

"So it wasn't unusual for the president to wander in after awhile and say,'Have you seen my dog?'" Mrs. Young said. Both the press people laughed.

ABC's Hank Brown talked of the more serious effect the Clinton youth movement has had on how he plays in the press.

"[Mr. Clinton] has a lot of new people, not only learning to deal with the press, but also with the Washington establishment, and that does have a profound impact on how he is perceived across the country.

"When there could be good press, it turns out to be bad press, because of their inexperience in setting up an event. I think it hurts him more than it helps," he said.

FOR A TIME, anyway, we had The White House beat covered.